

LETTER
OF
ALEXANDER CUMMINGS,
IN REPLY TO THE REPORT
OF THE
VAN WYCK COMMITTEE.

Presented to Congress by Hon. Wm. D. Kelley, March 6, 1862.

In the House of Representatives, on Thursday, the 6th of March, the following letter was introduced by Hon. WILLIAM D. KELLEY, of the Fourth District of Pennsylvania, with the subjoined remarks:

"Mr. CHAIRMAN: I rise to request this House to repair, in so far as it can by listening to and putting upon its Journal a statement, the wrong which, by publishing the report of one of its committees, it has done to a friend and constituent of mine, a gentleman of integrity and character, one who, from early life to his present age, has risen steadily by the energy and ability with which he has managed a large business, the control of a daily newspaper, and by the fidelity with which he has lived up to all his contracts with men. I now ask that the Clerk may read a letter which this gentleman has done me the honor to address me as his Representative. It is the letter of Col. Alexander Cummings, of Philadelphia, drawn from him by the fact that his announcement to the Committee that there was retained in the hands of Messrs. Dix, Blatchford, and Opdyke, \$140,000 accounted for by vouchers, has been given to the public, and commented upon as a statement that he had in his hands \$140,000 unaccounted for."

The Clerk read the paper, as follows:

HON. WILLIAM D. KELLEY,

Member of Congress, Fourth District, Pennsylvania:

A severe and protracted illness, from which I have as yet only partially recovered, has prevented me, until now, from responding to, or in way noticing, the extraordinary assault upon my character, contained in the Report of what is known as the "Van Wyck Committee," made to the House of Representatives on the 17th of December last. I embrace the earliest moments of returning health to meet and refute the unfounded allegations contained in that Report.

I address you because I am your constituent—long and well known to you—and need no further commendation. I ask you, therefore, upon the first fitting occasion, when this subject may be before the House, to introduce this letter, that it may have the same publicity with the slanders that have been uttered against me.

Towards the middle of December, not long after Congress had convened, hearing, greatly to my surprise, through a friend, that the Report of the Committee, about to be made, contained statements injuriously affecting my reputation, I came to Washington from a sick bed, against the earnest protest of my physician, with the view of seeing the members of the Committee, to ascertain, if possible, what was the question, if any, in their minds in relation to my transactions. I waited in person upon a majority of the members of the Committee, although scarcely able to leave the hotel; and, while I obtained no information, yet I inferred, from certain circumstances, that they were about to allege some

discrepancies in relation to my accounts. I knew, if the accounts were all before them, that there could be no complaint alleged against me, and earnestly requested the delay of the Report for a single day, stating to them that I would dispatch, and subsequently that I had sent a special messenger, to New York for Mr. Blatchford, who had in his possession facts and vouchers which would relieve me from the slightest suspicion in relation to the transactions which have received the animadversion of the Committee, and which I understood they were about to criticise.

Though refusing, by a vote of the majority of those present, to grant my request on these urgent, specific, and manifestly just grounds, and instructing their chairman to make the Report forthwith, it happened, by some accident, that the Report was delayed for the length of time I desired, during which interval Mr. Blatchford arrived in Washington, for the express purpose of appearing before the Committee. I immediately and personally communicated the fact of Mr. Blatchford's presence to the Committee.

I was advised by a physician in Washington, who was in constant attendance upon me—and warned by my own knowledge of my condition—that, if I would secure or regain my health, I must speedily return home. I left Washington, not entertaining a doubt that Mr. Blatchford, who remained there, would be called upon by the Committee to furnish the important information I had assured them was in his possession, and which would have saved me from the least suspicion of wrong. The public will be surprised, as I have been, to learn that Mr. Blatchford was not allowed to appear before the Committee, *until after the Report*, with all its reckless errors and calumnious misstatements, was launched upon the House and the country. I submit to you whether there ever was conduct more unjustifiable?

My illness—a severe attack of gastric fever—proved of long continuance, and for a considerable portion of the period of doubtful result, with utter inability and entire prohibition to even think of business of any kind whatever. During all this time, unconsciously to myself, the misrepresentations of the Committee have been poisoning the public mind. I have but quite recently been able to leave my room, and I have within the last three days, for the first time, even seen a copy of the Report. It is only since my arrival in Washington that I have learned of the extent of its injurious character. You may judge, if you can, how I have been astounded at its contents.

The extraordinary and unprecedented course of the Committee seemed to flow from a desire which, wronged as I have been, I will not impute to them, to produce an immense sensation with partial and unproven facts; and that course has given rise to an impression which the Committee owe it to themselves and the country promptly to dispel, that they deliberately and of purpose excluded the testimony of one of the most prominent citizens of New York, lest it should in any way conflict with the supposed developments with which they appeared to be eager to startle Congress and the people.

For myself, the best reply, and the most comprehensive and conclusive defense will be contained in a simple, brief, and impartial recital of all the transactions referred to by the Committee. So rapid has been the current of events, and so fleeting is memory, that it is necessary, by way of premise, to recall the exact condition of the country at the period referred to. Rebellion had not only engulfed all south of the Potomac, but the insurrectionary spirit had spread over Maryland, seized its metropolis, and cut off all communication between the capital of the nation and the loyal portion of the people. The terror and

the panic throughout the land for the fortnight succeeding the tragedy in Baltimore, on the 19th of April, was appalling, and well nigh paralyzing to the courage and energies of all. The national authorities at Washington were astonished and perplexed, and scarcely knew which way to turn for relief. They had found the officers of the regular army and navy deserting them by scores, and enlisting under a traitor ensign; and they knew not whom to trust, even among those that retained an outward allegiance to the "old flag"—many of whom, by subsequent desertion, have justified the suspicions then entertained of their loyalty. In this perilous emergency the corporation of the city of New York, prompted by the impulses of the popular mind, came forth with an appropriation of \$2,000,000, for the national defense; and the authorities at Washington—so soon as they could in any way convey a communication to New York—called to their aid persons intimately known to them, in whose judgment and integrity they had confidence, and of whose patriotic loyalty there was not a tinge of doubt. In pursuance of this design, measures were adopted by the Treasury and War Departments, (and the Navy also,) as set forth in the following communications:

TREASURY DEPARTMENT, *April 24, 1861.*

GENTLEMEN: Relying upon your well-known integrity and devotion to the best interests of the country, the President has this day authorized an advance to be made to you of \$2,000,000 as a fund from which legal and proper demands upon the Treasury may be met without the delay consequent upon the present interruption of all regular communication with this Department. Two drafts for \$1,000,000 each have this day gone forward, which will place such sum to your credit with the Assistant Treasurer at New York. The purpose of this fund is to meet only such requisitions as may be directly consequent upon the military and naval measures necessary for the defense and support of the Government. You are therefore authorized and requested to pay such demands upon you, within the above limit, as are presented to you by the duly constituted agents of the Government.

The Department doubts not your willingness to render every assistance in your power in this unprecedented state of affairs. When possible, it is hoped that you will all unite in each act hereby authorized. If, however, from any cause, such united action cannot be had, a majority may exercise the full authority given to the whole; and if any extraordinary emergency shall create a necessity for it, any one may do so.

Very respectfully,

(Signed)

S. P. CHASE, *Secretary of the Treasury.*

MESSRS. JOHN A. DIX, GEORGE OPDYKE, R. M. BLATCHFORD, New York.

APRIL 21, 1861.

DEAR SIR: You will receive another letter from me with this.

We shall need supplies to a very large amount sent here from New York, since the interruption to purchases in Baltimore. They will, I think, much of them, have to come via Easton, Reading, Harrisburg, and the rest by sea, via Annapolis. I have called on Thomas A Scott to take charge of the railroads, and I want you to assist the commissaries and quartermasters in pushing forward their supplies, as well as in aiding them in making purchases at or from New York.

We need men here without delay, and supplies should accompany them if possible.

SIMON CAMERON.

A. CUMMINGS.

DEPARTMENT OF WAR, *April 23, 1861.*

In consideration of the extraordinary emergencies which demand immediate and decisive measures for the preservation of the national capital and the defense of the national Government, I hereby authorize Edwin D. Morgan, Governor of the State of New York, and Alexander Cummings, now in the city of New York, to make all necessary arrangements for the transportation of troops and munitions of war in aid and assistance of the officers of the army of the

United States until communication by mails and telegraph is completely re-established between the cities of Washington and New York. Either of them, in case of inability to consult with the other, may exercise the authority hereby given.

SIMON CAMERON, *Secretary of War.*

Under the authority thus conferred, purchases of clothing, arms, and other supplies were made by me, and ships were chartered to carry troops, &c., to the gross amount of \$221,734 40, for which I have filed in the Treasury Department vouchers in detail—a full statement of all of which was furnished to the Committee in New York, in September last. And I told them at the same time that the remainder of the vouchers were in the hands of Mr. Blatchford, for other purchases made by my authority, which would complete the whole account. The balance in my hands, \$3,193 62, was subsequently deposited with Mr. Cisco, the Assistant Treasurer at New York, for which I have his certificate; a copy of which is filed in the Treasury Department. The vouchers and certificates together amount to \$224,928 01. The vouchers in the hands of Mr. Blatchford, which he had with him, when here, in December, and ready to exhibit to the Committee, as I assured them, with a balance in his hands of about \$8,000—since deposited with the U. S. Treasurer in New York—amount to the sum of \$165,071 99—making, altogether, three hundred and ninety thousand dollars—which was the total amount drawn from that portion of the two millions placed in the hands of Messrs. Dix, Blatchford, and Opdyke, subject to the draft of Governor Morgan and myself, for the purposes indicated in the above letters.

The vouchers in the hands of Mr. Blatchford, which I have before stated the Committee so unreasonably and ruthlessly refused even to look at, contained not only the authority of the name of Mr. Blatchford himself, but most of them are endorsed by the signatures of Moses H. Grinnell, Captain Charles H. Marshall, and Samuel Sloan, all alike eminent for their integrity and intelligent devotion to the interests of the country. Many of the articles whose purchase is thus endorsed by these vouchers, were bought under the direction of General Wool and General Dix; and not a small portion were directly purchased by General Wadsworth in person, for the purpose of freighting the steamer *Kill-von-Kull*, which he sent forward with these stores for the relief of the Government; all of which the Committee would have seen, if they had yielded to my importunity and called Mr. Blatchford, and thus the whole question of the rightful expenditure of all the money would have been disposed of.

It is thus made evident, by authentic and well-attested vouchers, that the money drawn from the two million fund was honorably expended for what was thought to be, and really was, the necessity of the Government.

It is made equally evident that the statement of the Report—still more plainly and offensively repeated in Congressional speeches by members of the Committee—that a large balance of \$140,000 was retained in my possession, is destitute of the slightest semblance or shadow of truth—the only seeming ground for which, at any time, appears to have been a singular misapprehension or an ingenious and wilful alteration of the language of my note to the Committee, and appended to my testimony. The note, as written to the Committee, and which is now in *their* possession, is literally and legibly as follows. Mark the words:

“There retained—under authority of the Secretary of the Treasury—by Messrs. Dix, Blatchford & Opdyke, one hundred & forty thousand dollars, besides what I have stated in my testimony, which is accounted for by the vouchers.”

The original draft of the note, still in *my* possession, is as follows :

"There was retained—under authority of the Secretary of the Treasury—by Messrs. Dix, Blatchford & Opdyke, one hundred & forty thousand dollars, besides what I have stated in my testimony, which is accounted for by the vouchers."

In copying it very hastily for the Committee, I seem to have omitted the word "was;" but the least intelligent reader would in an instant have supplied it, and indeed without it the meaning is entirely plain.

The Committee, in their report, printed it as follows, and founded upon their version an argument that I had possession of \$140,000. Their whole line of argument and injurious deductions is thus based upon an alteration of my language:

"I have retained, under authority of the Secretary of the Treasury, by Messrs. Dix, Blatchford & Opdyke, one hundred & forty thousand dollars, besides what I have stated in my testimony, which is accounted for by the vouchers."

It will thus be seen that, in changing the word "there" to the words "I have," the Report not only reduced the language of the note to an absurdity, but, so far as it left any meaning in it at all, it changed the depositary of the \$140,000 from Messrs. Dix, Blatchford, and Opdyke, (by whom it was held by proper authority,) to myself; who, according to their insinuations, retained it without vouchers of any character whatever.

But aside from, and independently of, this critical exposition of the alteration of my language by the author of the Report, from which I have been suffering, I have happily at command official papers sustaining, in whole and in detail, my statement on this point—all of which Mr. Blatchford would have exhibited to the Committee if he had been allowed to appear before them.

The original deposit of the \$2,000,000 in New York, by Secretary Chase, (made upon the official requisition of the Secretary of War and Secretary of the Navy, for \$1,000,000 each,) and the authorization, by Secretary Cameron, to use that portion appropriated to the War Department, were procedures growing out of the imperious necessity of the hour, and justified by this necessity, as at least partially conceded by the Committee in their Report. When the exigency was removed, by the re-establishment of communication between the loyal States and the capital, the deposit of the money was very properly withdrawn by Secretary Chase, as will be seen by the following letter:

TREASURY DEPARTMENT, 6th May, 1861.

GENTLEMEN: Regular communications with New York having been established, although not as frequent nor as rapid as heretofore, thus removing the absolute necessity which existed on the 24th April last for special disbursing officers in the city of New York, and referring to my letter of instructions of that date, I request that such sum as may be remaining in your hands of the amount of \$2,000,000 advanced to you on that date, to meet legal and proper demands upon the Treasury, may be deposited with the Assistant Treasurer at New York to the credit of the Treasurer of the United States; and that you will, as early as practicable, render your account with the vouchers to this Department, that the same may be promptly settled.

There is no doubt that your report, when received, will be entirely satisfactory, and that your proceedings will be found to have been in accordance with the high estimation entertained of you by this Department.

You will please consider this as a revocation of the authority given in my letter of the 24th ult., and accept the thanks of this Department for your patriotic services.

I am, very respectfully,

S. P. CHASE, *Secretary of the Treasury.*

Messrs. DIX, BLATCHFORD, and OPDYKE, *New York.*

To which Messrs. Dix, Blatchford, and Opdyke replied, stating that there were outstanding obligations amounting to about \$140,000, which amount they had retained, *subject to the approval of the Secretary of the Treasury.*

In rejoinder, these gentlemen received the following telegraphic communication:

"WASHINGTON, May 11th.

"Your reservation of fund to meet requisition of War Department, through Mr. Cummings, approved.

"S. P. CHASE, *Secretary of the Treasury.*"

It was to this sum, and to the action in relation to it, that I referred in my note, so strangely garbled and misused. I referred to it because it was in addition to what had been at first expended, as I discovered on examining my papers, *having endeavored in vain to induce the Committee to allow me to furnish them the vouchers and papers, instead of relying on my recollection*; and I wrote the note that there might not be the appearance of an omission. But the note stated, in relation to it, that this sum "*is accounted for by the vouchers,*" which seemed to render it impossible for any misapprehension; and I think now that no fair mind could have misapprehended it, and certainly no honest mind would have altered it.

All these facts, so perspicuous, so undeniable, and so conclusive, as to the rightful retention and appropriation of the \$140,000—with the knowledge and sanction of the authorities of the Government—could have been had by the Committee if they had been willing even to hear the testimony of Mr. Blatchford, who had all the papers necessary to a full understanding of the case, as previously stated.

It should be remembered that during all my interviews with the members of the Committee I had not the remotest idea of what they were about to complain of. I was never once asked to explain a syllable about the \$140,000, nor was it hinted to me that that was a question in their minds; and, indeed, I had been assured that they had no serious complaint to make against me.

The simple statement of these facts convicts the Committee of such gross and reckless injustice, that I do not feel called upon to stamp it or characterize it with the deserved and appropriate epithets.

If it be alleged that this alteration of which I complain was a mistake, unwittingly and not wilfully made, then, I ask, why did not the Committee recall me, to ascertain the meaning of the note which their alteration had reduced to nonsense; or, worse still, why did they refuse so pertinaciously to hear Mr. Blatchford, whose statement I assured them would make everything perfectly plain?

Is it too much to say that, however the alteration may have been made originally, the Committee, by their subsequent conduct toward me, and by the argument of the Report, made it wilfully their own?

In farther evidence that this authority to act in New York was regarded as only temporary, and resulting from a peculiar exigency, the following letter was addressed, by Secretary Cameron, to Governor Morgan and myself at the same time with the letter of Secretary Chase, withdrawing the deposit:

WAR DEPARTMENT, *Washington, May 7, 1861.*

GENTLEMEN: The extraordinary emergency, which demanded immediate and decisive measures for the preservation of the national capital, and the defense of the national government, rendered it necessary for this Department to adopt extraordinary means for that purpose; and having full confidence in your intelligence, experience and integrity, you were authorized to make all necessary arrangements for the transportation of troops, &c., in aid and assistance of the officers of the army of the United States, until the re-establishment of communication, by mails and telegraph, between the cities of New York and Washington.

Uninterrupted communication between the two cities being now again established, and it being desirable that the duties heretofore attended to by you should be hereafter performed by the officers of the army, to whom they properly belong, I beg to tender you the thanks of this Department for the very prompt and efficient manner in which you have discharged the duties assigned you, and to request you to cease making purchases, procure transports, or at-

tending to other duties under authority given, which could be justified only by the emergency, and now happily no longer existing.

Respectfully yours,

SIMON CAMERON,

Secretary of War.

Gov. E. D. MORGAN, and

ALEXANDER CUMMINGS, Esq., *New York City.*

I have thus, by a plain statement of facts, accompanied by official documents from the Treasury and War Departments, disposed of the principal calumny of the Report. In looking back over the history of the last few months, it seems really marvellous that any portion of the public could have believed so preposterous a story—which has been so industriously circulated through the agency of this Report—as that the large sum of \$140,000 of the public money would have been allowed, by the vigilant and honest head of the Treasury Department, to remain in any hands unaccounted for.

I have this satisfactory reflection: that, notwithstanding the criticisms of the Committee, about the looseness of these transactions, and the accounts pertaining to them, they never could have been taken up for settlement without a perfect vindication of my character in relation to the whole affair. My note, as altered, might have remained unexplained, but nothing else. The facts and figures are in proper order, and would speak for themselves in all time, with or without my presence, and I so assured my friend, to whom I have alluded in the first part of this letter, who was alarmed for my sake, by the rumor that seemed to have leaked out of the Committee.

I might close here, but for the labored attempt of the Committee, while admitting, in language, the integrity of my purpose, yet attempting by insinuation to fix a stigma upon me for some of the minor acts connected with the execution of my trust. Of these, the one most harped upon is the purchase of linen pantaloons and straw hats for the troops. It is not alleged that a high price was paid for these articles; on the contrary, it is well known that they were purchased at a very low rate—being about ninety cents a pair for the pantaloons, and sixteen cents apiece for the hats. The most, therefore, that can be charged in this affair, and others of similar character, is an error of judgment. On that point I am not sensitive; but I may be excused for still believing that large bodies of men, suddenly transferred from the northerly climes of Maine and Michigan, where the chill of winter was still upon them, to a latitude where the heat was ranging from seventy-five to eighty degrees, would find great relief and comfort, and, indeed, an exemption from the danger of sudden overheating and sun-stroke—many cases of which actually occurred—by the seasonable clothing thus provided. These men were not soldiers, in the technical sense of that term, long enured to woollen uniforms, but they were volunteers from all the walks of life; and in New York, and in Washington, also, at that time, it was thought sensible to provide for them such clothing as in similar climate they would provide for themselves. They were fully the equals of, living in like manner with, the members of this Committee, adapting their clothing to the change of the seasons—a fact which seems to have been utterly forgotten by the Committee. The eagerness with which the articles in question were sought by the troops—who would have been glad to purchase them at the price they were procured by the Government—may be quoted as some proof of the wisdom of the purchase. They were no more outside of the army regulation than the purchase of winter gloves for the soldiers on picket duty. The Committee, it is fair to presume, from their action on this question, would let the soldiers' fingers freeze to their musket-locks rather than have a sound discretion exercised in such an emergency. So much for that large point which occupies a considerable portion of the Report, and whose vast importance has called forth speeches in both Houses of Congress!

With regard to the purchase of ale, about which so much is said, the same character of reply, to some extent at least, may be made. No one will deny that it might have been made useful both in the hospitals and out of them; and I doubt not it was used advantageously. But if it were not, it is surely no fault of mine.

The accusations of the report do not stop with those matters with which I was connected, but there seems to be a desire to drag me into others with which I had no connection whatever. Of these, the most unjustifiable is the insinuation that I had some connection with the chartering of the steamer *Cataline*—an insinuation made indirectly, but significantly, after I had on oath averred

that I had no connection whatever, in any way, direct or indirect, with that steamer, nor even knowledge of its ownership or charter. I repeat that averment in the most emphatic and unqualified manner. This averment is in no way affected by the note which the Committee publish, showing that I had ordered freight on board of the *Cataline*. She had been chartered by Colonel Tompkins, U. S. Quartermaster at New York, as the Committee ascertained, and I told them that it was very likely some of the articles I had purchased were forwarded by her, because they were sent by any vessel that was in the service and ready to go. In the note which the Committee parade, in connection with this subject, two other vessels are named as well as the *Cataline*—the *Roanoke* and *Chesapeake*—as having freight on board from me; and I have not, to this hour, the remotest idea of who owned them then or now, nor who chartered them for the Government; and I knew no more of the *Cataline* than I knew of them. It was not at all necessary, nor hardly even within my province, to inquire who owned or chartered them.

Without going farther into detail upon the various matters embraced in the Report of the Committee, I content myself with the declaration that the money expended by myself and those with whom I was associated, was disbursed economically and wisely; and that in the whole vast outlay that has attended this war, in no instance has the Government more truly or more fully got its money's worth, or the disbursing agents more strictly and conscientiously discharged their onerous duties. And it is proper to add that very little was done toward the safety of the Government in its great emergency except through this provision of its officers above alluded to, and the action of the city of New York, through the Union Defense Committee.

As an evidence, and in illustration, of the care used in the expenditure of the funds provided for this emergency, I may properly cite once instance out of many cases that occurred: During the period alluded to, the Government decided, I think in Cabinet meeting, to purchase the steamer *Atlantic*, then in the public service, under a charter made by regular officers of the army; and I was authorized, and, indeed, almost instructed by a telegraphic dispatch, to purchase her for the sum of \$350,000—the price named in her charter—at which the Government had a right to purchase. I received the dispatch late in the evening of Saturday, the 4th of May, stating that her charter would expire the next day, which was Sunday. It had evidently been represented to the Government by parties who were in Washington, that it was important that the privilege to purchase provided for in the charter should be taken advantage of. After obtaining what information I could, I decided not to make the purchase, and so reported to the War Department, informing the Secretary that the vessel had not long before been offered at a much lower price, and probably would be again so offered if not bought now. I understand she has subsequently been offered to the Government for about \$250,000, making an actual saving, if it is still thought wise to purchase her, of a sum equal to one-fourth of all the money I expended during the dark and perilous period that followed the memorable 19th of April.

I have now done. I have spoken in self-defense. I have spoken plainly, as is my right, and the right of every man unjustly assailed. I have not harshly characterized the Report, but I have shown, by official and irrefragable proof, the groundlessness of its charges and insinuations as affecting the transactions with which I was connected. I do not doubt, indeed I have the utmost confidence in, the personal honesty and candor of certain members of the Committee; and I feel assured that, upon a review of all the facts in the case, they will be alike anxious to vindicate me from the aspersions which they have unwittingly assisted in heaping upon me, and to relieve themselves of the injustice which, perhaps through misapprehension and haste, they have, in the face of the country, committed against a citizen, of whom they can justly allege no wrong. I have given a complete and impartial, though necessarily brief, statement of this whole transaction, in reply to the Report of the Committee, by which I have been made to suffer so unjustly. I have made it without resentful impulses, for which, if I had been disposed to indulge them, there is ample scope. But I prefer to make no retorts, and have only to say, in conclusion, *Fiat justitia.*

I am, as ever, yours truly,

ALEXANDER CUMMINGS.

WASHINGTON, February 25, 1862.